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AUTHOR McClish, Glen
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ABSTRACT

Controversy and debate can be effectively employed as the central pre-writing activity in the composition classroom. The current model of prewriting in the composition classroom is the reflective model, which involves relatively private exploration of issues and ideas leading to paper topics. Although in the short run it is easier for both student and instructor to stress personal discovery through composition and to accentuate agreement and common ground between writer and reader, in the long run students benefit from being compelled to confront one another. In the initial stages at least, invention is primarily a process of discovering how one disagrees with a viable opposition. Thus, students learn to write with conviction and integrity when they have a firm grasp of their opponent's viewpoint. In addition, the confrontational approach is closer to the spirit of Renaissance humanism and the tradition of liberal arts education than is reflective invention. A practical example of the confrontational approach involves examination of texts by William James and Sigmund Freud. James' "The Will to Believe" presents a powerful, complex argument praising religious faith, while Freud's "The Future of an Illusion" presents a counter-argument stressing the importance of science. By featuring the clash between James and Freud, the stage is set for profound disagreement, which fuels student discussion and debate, and in turn provides students a reference for their theses. (Six references are attached). (ARH)

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CONTROVERSY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: DEBATE AS A MODE OF PRE-WRITING

Glen McClish
Southwestern University
Georgetown, Texas

In this paper, I make the case that controversy and debate be employed as the central pre-writing activity in the composition classroom. I argue that although in the short run it is easier for both student and instructor to stress personal discovery through composition and to accentuate agreement and common ground between writer and reader, in the long run students discover the great benefits of being compelled to confront one another. Asserting that--in the initial stages, at least--invention is primarily a process of discovering how one disagrees with a viable opposition, I seek to demonstrate that students learn to write with conviction and integrity when they have a firm grasp of their opponent's viewpoint. In order to illustrate my argument, I draw examples from William James's "The Will to Believe" and Sigmund Freud's The Future of an Illusion.

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CONTROVERSY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: DEBATE AS A MODE OF PRE-WRITING

Glen McClish
Southwestern University

Although most composition textbooks stress the importance of writing from personal conviction, few classroom approaches to composition explore any but the safest routes to invention. For the student, too little is at stake in the search for an appropriate paper topic and thesis. In light of this unworldly emphasis on the benign, I propose that controversy and debate be employed as the central pre-writing activity in the composition classroom. I contend that although in the short run it may be easier and more efficient for both students and instructor to accentuate self-exploration and introspection, in the long run students benefit from being compelled to confront one another. Arguing that--in the initial stages at least--invention is primarily a process of discovering how one differs from viable opposition, I will show that students feel most inspired to write about things that matter when they highlight their struggle with their opponent's viewpoint. To illustrate my argument, I will call on two autonomous, yet related arguments of considerable length and complexity, William James's "The Will to Believe" and Freud's The Future of an Illusion.

Before moving to specific analyses of these challenging texts, though, let us examine at greater length the argument I have summarized above. I would like to begin by positing two basic models of pre-writing in the composition classroom, the reflective and the confrontational.

The reflective or introspective model, which currently holds sway, involves relatively private exploration of issues and ideas leading to paper topics. Students are exposed to ideas, and are encouraged to discover their relevance by engaging in various forms of reflection. This form of pre-writing is predominantly personal--although classroom discussion may indeed take place, it serves primarily to instigate rather than to shape the character of one's thought in an elemental way. Through assignments such as free writing and journals, students are encouraged to reflect privately on the central ideas. From these private writings grow private, personal paper topics and theses.

The process is often conceived of as a tutorial. Spinning off from the instigating text or discussion, students consult with the instructor when their creativity flags. Like Descartes, whose personal thought process provides the substance of his thought, these students focus specifically on self-consciousness.

In the chapter entitled "Expressing Yourself" in Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition, Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate write,[1]

> "Know thyself" comes down to us from the ancient writers as one of the most important prescriptions for a happy and successful life. And, whether we do it consciously or not, most of us expend much effort in pursuit of knowledge about ourselves. We keep diaries, we talk endlessly about ourselves to others, we sift the comments of our friends to discover what they think of us, and, occasionally, we engage in autobiographical

> writing . . . . [W]e shall concentrate just on personal self-expression, in particular the short autobiographical pieces often called personal essays....The purpose will be to help you extract meaning--some sort of knowledge about yourself--from the experience.

Let us look also at the conclusion to the chapter on "Discovering and Inventing Ideas," in Ben McClelland's Writing Practice: A Rhetoric of the Writing Process:[2]

> Writers invent and develop ideas for papers by actively working through thinking strategies. While there are many methods which may prove successful, this chapter presents only a few methods to stimulate and focus your thinking, and to help you begin sorting through and organizing your ideas.

What is most significant about these two quotations is the emphasis on the personal, the private, the individual. Paper topics come from "thinking strategies" and from "knowing thyself." Tempered from within, such invention inherently isolates.

In many cases, texts chosen to enhance this reflective approach to composition instruction function to reveal the verities and to stimulate a love of fine writing. In the student's introduction to The Writer's Resource: Readings for Composition, for example, Susan Day and Elizabeth McMahan assert:[3]

> We have collected these readings not only because we admire their style and structure, but also because we think you will enjoy them and find them enlightening. A fondness for the language and a sharp eye for technique, both of which we hope to encourage in you, are the very best teachers of writing.

In these terms, course readings become venerable models for appreciation and emulation.

The reflective or workshop model of composition is collaborative, but once again collaboration is based on developing personal exploration and self-expression. Getting the student to say what he or she really means is at the heart of it.

The attractive thing about the reflective model is that it seems so much in tune with our liberal arts tradition. It has obvious ties to Platonic and Cartesian thinking; it allows the individual personal space to think and to develop his or her own ideas; and it is egalitarian--my thought process is as valid as yours. Furthermore, it encourages the kind of one-to-one student-teacher relationships we prize.

We have seen that in the reflective setting, student and instructor interact on an ad hoc basis as the former comes to grips with his or her thought process. In the confrontational setting, though, public arguments about issues of vital importance to the students gain center stage from the outset. Classroom discussion focuses on arguing as many sides of the controversy as arise. The instructor's primary job is not to administer individual help when needed, nor is it to advocate one

side or another, but to see that all positions are assessed in the market place of ideas. Rich, complicated, problematic texts are deployed to keep arguments from becoming cliched or predictable. Most composition anthologies, even when they focus on controversy, rather than "style," "structure," or "enlightenment," provide little help here because they include too few pieces of sufficient length and complexity to generate such discussions. Furthermore, such anthologies often make the differences between positions too neat and tidy. When selections are precisely juxtaposed, and responses tightly controlled with leading questions, little, if anything, is left to the student. The process becomes mechanical; the end result resembles the all-too-familiar television debates that conclude before anything but pat stances are expressed. What is needed is a reading list that includes enough thorough going, autonomous, self-contained yet interrelated texts to produce a term's worth of extended arguments.

The debate model presents immediate drawbacks, of course. Classroom time otherwise devoted to individual help is spent on arguments that are often relatively impersonal. Good discussions may take a good while to set in motion, and are often correspondingly difficult to shut down. The instructor is placed in the difficult position of moderator--often making hard decisions about who declaims and who has said enough already. Tempers flair, and often students and instructors leave the room in a state of considerable agitation. Furthermore, reading loads--which have lightened with the popularity of reflective

invention--increase considerably with this approach. By putting so much emphasis on the arguments of those not actually enrolled in the course, we have left less class time to devote to the students' writing.

But despite these obvious drawbacks, the confrontational approach is arguably closer to the spirit of Renaissance Humanism and the tradition of liberal arts education than reflective invention. Humanism, which owed much to the efforts of lawyers and worldly clergy, was debate oriented. Like their predecessor Cicero, the great Humanists centered on controversia, on pro and con analysis.[4] They emphasized practical thinking as well as personal reflection. Burning issues inspired Humanists to become citizen writers. This very urgency is what we need to nurture in our classrooms. And now, as we speak of specific issues of burning importance, let us move to practical examples.

"The Will to Believe," James's affirmation of faith, is based on an intriguing form of pragmatism. Following Pascal, he argues that the potential negative consequences of atheism are far greater than the risks associated with belief. But James goes beyond the famous "wager" to embrace belief that naturally arises from the will. Given the inherent uncertainty of our modern world, thoughtful individuals should follow their instincts and believe that which undeniably tugs at the heart.

What is so useful about James's religious argument is that he forsakes hell fire and brimstone and many of the other overt emotional appeals familiar to our students, who have cut their teeth on Pat, Billy, Tammy, Jimmy, and the rest. Unlike the

typical media preacher of the contemporary American scene, James makes the necessarily emotional case for belief as logically as possible. Here, for example, as he attacks the scientific skepticism which encourages individuals not to believe anything without adequate proof, he adopts a supremely logical ethos:[5]

> When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete man, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and wait--acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were not true--till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough,--this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave.

Again, while analyzing situations in which communal belief itself effects positive action, James reverts not merely to pathos, but carefully structured logos:[6]

> . . . where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall. Yet this is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

James posits himself as the rational scientist of the human heart. The skeptical positivist becomes the headstrong,

unreasonable philosopher, dogmatically reaching for the positivism that endlessly eludes the grasp. If our students disagree with James, they will have trouble relying on their usual objections.

James's argument is complex. It twists and turns, and gives students fits. But whether it is presented on its own or supplemented with essays such as "Is Life Worth Living?" and "The Dilemma of Determinism," this piece masterfully affirms faith. It forces students to think about their religious beliefs in a new way, and it compels the atheist or the agnostic to adopt innovative lines of attack.

In order to shore up the forces of skepticism, we marshal Freud's spirited attack on religion in modern society, The Future of an Illusion. Freud boldly reverses James's complicated, cautiously reasoned argument as he works diligently to overturn his predecessor's optimism about man's will. Indirectly responding to James's praise of faith, Freud suggests that science, not intuition or introspection, best reveals reality: " . . . scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves. It is . . . merely an illusion to expect anything from intuition or introspection; they give us nothing but particulars about our own mental life."[7] Asserting "one's arbitrary will" on religious matters is in Freud's terms "insolent."[8] Questioning the "right" to believe before all the facts are in, Freud boldly declares, "Ignorance is ignorance; no right to believe anything can be derived from it."[9] Reacting to the unclear image philosophers such as James paint of

God, he accuses believers of disguising weak arguments with equivocation.[10] James's celebration of our passional nature is replaced by the assertion that such feelings are simply the product of corrupt education.[11] Whereas James argues that faith has positive consequences for the individual and for society, Freud declares that "civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we give it up,"[12] because religion depends on maintaining the evil in humankind.[13]

As mentioned earlier, James confounds expectations by arguing rationally for irrational feelings. Freud, too, forces students to rethink their cliched responses by deploying pathos to advocate his scientific, psychoanalytic approach.[14] While unfolding his extensive argument, we need to push our students to examine the basic premises which underlie Freud's conclusions and to see for themselves how he moves from common ground to bitter controversy. How, in effect, does he support his confidence--his faith--in science and psychology?

By featuring the clash between James and Freud, we set the stage for profound disagreement. Our students must use the discussion and debate as a reference for their theses. It is to this community of concern that they must turn and return to develop their ideas. Their position is inherently uncomfortable--out of confusion they must think coherently and confidently about a topic they have been told polite people do not discuss. Rather than merely "finding themselves" in the abstract, they locate themselves within the context of a specific argument.

Ideally, they are moved to influence tangible others. This form of invention is not something someone does in the privacy of one's mind for self-gratification--it's painfully public and potentially subversive. Yet, it may be some of the most meaningful thinking our students will ever do.

In the reflective model of invention, connection to real-world argumentation is tangential to the process of self-expression. With the debate or confrontational model, though, the link to the outside word is no longer an afterthought, but a commonplace. The composition course with ideas becomes an ideas course with composition.

Notes

[1] James L. Kinneavy, William McCleary, and Neil Nakadate, Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1985) 19-20.

[2] Ben W. McClelland, Writing Practice: A Rhetoric of the Writing Process (New York: Longman, 1984) 55-56.

[3] Susan Day and Elizabeth McMahan, The Writer's Resource: Readings for Composition (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988) xxv-xxvi.

[4] See Thomas O. Sloane, Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 85-99.

[5] William James, "The Will to Believe," in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956) 29-30.

[6] James, 25.

[7] Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961) 31.

[8] Freud, 32.

[9] Freud, 32.

[10] Freud, 32.

[11] Freud, 47.

[12] Freud, 35.

[13] Freud, 38.

[14] Freud, 50-51.